DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 723 FL 018 724

AUTHOR Negussie, Birgit
TITLE Oral Skills and Knowledge of Languages: A Resource in Development.
PUB DATE Aug 88
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (10th, Paris, France, August 22-26, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; *Epistemology; Females; *Folk Culture; Foreign Countries; *Indigenous Populations; *Interpersonal Communication; Language Skills; *Oral Language; Social History
IDENTIFIERS *Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

Ethiopia is a country with an old and rich oral tradition. The older generation is more knowledgeable than the younger in oral literature, and there is a need to document such knowledge before it is lost. Traditional health knowledge has come into focus as self-care for ailments has become more prevalent. Indigenous knowledge and its transmission is often practically oriented, as in transmission of behavioral patterns, dietary patterns, traditional medicine, and traditional pharmacopia. Initiation rites are important as rites of passage and learning forums for the younger generation. The practice of bearing and fostering the first child in the woman's mother's house also serves as a learning forum, during which the child learns much about cultural heritage and behavior, practical knowledge, housekeeping, and gardening. It also serves as a link between generations. Dietary customs are transmitted throughout life. Ethiopia's multilingual society has ample potential for transmission of knowledge. Elderly non-literate women commonly manage several languages, learned both in childhood and adulthood, and children are continuously taught in several languages. Radio is a likely vehicle for transmission of information, particularly in combination with literacy education. Orally based cultures such as this have a hidden resource that can be consciously used for modern development. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ኢትዮ/ ዓለም: ለቀፍ: የኢትዮ-ጵያ: ጥናትና: ማሪመራ: ጉባዔ::

Société Française pour les Etudes Ethiopiennes
French Society for Ethiopian Studies

X ème CONFERENCE INTERNATIONALE DES ETUDES ETHIOPIENNES

X th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF ETHIOPIAN STUDIES

(PARIS - FRANCE - 1988)

ED322723

ORAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGES.

A RESOURCE IN DEVELOPMENT.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Negussie

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Conference Paper for

The Tenth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies

Paris

22-26 August, 1988.

Birgit Negussie

Institute of International Education

University of Stockholm

Sweden

FL018724

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ORAL SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGES.

A RESOURCE IN DEVELOPMENT.

1. Introduction.

When studying Ethiopian history and culture it becomes evident that Ethiopia is a country with an old oral tradition. It concerns many different issues and is a treasure of knowledge, which for many ages has been transmitted from generation to generation. Ethiopian history, religions and culture are in this way preserved up to modern times. It seems, though, that the older generation is more knowledgeable in oral literature than the younger. Therefore, there is an urgent need to document such knowledge before it is lost.

My own thesis (1988) is an attempt to document one kind of indigenous (traditional) orally-based knowledge, especially focusing upon traditional health knowledge. Indigenous knowledge, especially concerning traditional medicine, fascinates many researchers, and many authors document different types of such knowledge (Legesse, 1973; Young, 1970; Messing, 1957; Molvaer, 1980; Pankhurst, 1964 and others). Leslau (1956, 1982), Cerulli (1956), Knutsson (1967), Hable Selassie (1972) and Braukämper (1973, 1980, 1983) have, for example, documented much historical material, based upon oral transmission. Burton (1844) and Budge (1966) have also contributed much to such documentation. Brögger (1986) discusses thoroughly beliefs and experience among the Sidamo, and focuses especially upon knowledge aspects.

Indigenous knowledge has also come more into focus, the more people need to use self care for the treatment of their ailments. It concerns, though, not only health knowledge, but also, for example, trado-ecological and trado-agricultural knowledge (compare Fukui, 1987). Gusfield (1967) is another author who

discusses traditionality and modernity, pointing out that they are not necessarily polar opposites, but rather components in a development process (see further Negussie, 1988). Indigenous knowledge is thus an important part of a vast oral literature, and needs to be carefully abstracted and studied.

The individual's store of knowledge is commented on by Elkana in Husen and Postlethwaite (1985:2823), saying that a few hundred years ago a person had to know much concerning movements of the stars, concerning the climates, the tides, the supplies of grain and the regulations about avoiding epidemics and diseases. The amount of knowledge was almost as much as modern experts have today. Much of this type of knowledge is relevant for illiterates also today. It concerns people's immediate conditions, and represents a large store of human knowledge, which still is relevant in many places.

2. Oral Skills and Transmission of Oral Wisdom.

Finnegan (1970) discusses oral literature in detail, bringing up different elements in African oral literature, such as the drum literature, the poetry, the proverbs and the music. Each culture has its own style of oral literature, and often music and songs are used for transmission of a certain message. Gestures and dramatic bodily movements play important roles, such as dances and songs with participation also by the audience. Much of the oral literature is transmitted through songs and stories. Such a "breaking into pieces" is the traditional society's way of handling a large amount of knowledge. It is, therefore, according to Fuglesang (1982) close to the modern computerized society. Recitations and story-telling are popular, and the use of riddles tends to test the listener's intelligence by getting him/her to discover the message.

Vast areas of Africa are without written sources for their history, and in such cases the oral tradition, transmitted from generation to generation, plays a crucial role. In pre-literate areas there are many old men and women who are versed in the ancient lore of their people. They carry a body of knowledge, which can easily be lost. Documentation of such orally-based material is now coming more and more into focus, and there is a need of a multi-disciplinary approach to study it. Researchers need in these cases to be well aquainted with the cultures concerned.

Scheub (1985) examines African oral traditions and literature in detail. "African oral tradition is never simply a spoken art; it is an enactment, an event, a ritual, a performance".. (Ibid, p 3). "Oral history is more a comment than a record. It is a way of observing a society that reveals the way the community feels about itself. It preserves important moments in a cultural movement through time, and it does this by means of images that are often found in imaginative tales and poems. This is because those images embody aspects of tradition that can be expressed in no other way. They are sometimes fantastic, often cyclical, always mythic, and are found permanently trapped in the images of epic". (Ibid, p 2). This paper does not allow a deep analysis of all the components in oral traditions, but rather gives a hint of the rich, undocumented treasure which is hidden in African, here Ethiopian, orally transmitted history. Many years of experience and observations in Ethiopia confirm such features. Ethiopia has a rich oral culture, and much knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation. It concerns, for example, trado-ecological knowledge, trado-medical knowledge and trado-pharmacological knowledge (compare Negussie, 1988).

It is closely observed how much history, poetry and tribal etiquette are transmitted informally, usually as stories, with elderly people as story-tellers, as riddles, where the young generation has to solve the problem. Speeches are not blunt and direct, rather is it common that the speaker tells his message in a way so that the audience can use its own social intelligence to find out the hidden meaning of the message. It is also common to tell the opposite of a direct message. Some of these models of transmitting knowledge may also be connected with deep-rooted religio-cultural beliefs, such as evil eye and evil spirits (compare Messing, 1957; Young, 1970; Reminick, 1976, et cetera). Children may be called with a name of the opposite sex, as a protection for evil spirits and evil eye (see also Messing, 1957).

In order to understand the depth of Ethiopian orally-based culture, it is, therefore, necessary to follow such features for a long period. Another type of knowledge, which is handed down from generation to generation is of genealogical character. Legesse (1973), Negussie Z (1976), Braukämper (1973,1980,1983) and many others studied such knowledge, which seems to have had special relevance among ethnic groups who were pastoralists. Among many groups it is common to trace their own lineage 15-20 generations backwards, often ending up with a common ancestor, well-known in history. Arficio (in Braukämper, 1980) and Negussie Z (1976) have, for example, traced their forefathers to the time of Za'ra Yacob (1434-1468). It was interesting to find out that the number of forefathers they counted to were the same, and as these authors are at a fairly equal age at present, it gives some evidence about the accuracy of the knowledge. Braukämper (1980, op cit) has documented many other lineages and some of them have been confirmed by my own observations. Braukämper (1973) also

discusses the relevance of oral knowledge to history.

Indigenous knowledge and its transmission is often practically-oriented knowledge, such as transmission of behavioral patterns, dietary patterns, traditional medicine and traditional pharmacopeia. Initiation rites (e.g.circumcisions) play important roles, being both rites-de-passage and a learning forum for the younger generation. They contain also pieces of knowledge about the traditional reproductive system, why abolition of circumcision has to be seen in a wide cultural perspective, and not only as a medical operation.

The practice of bearing and fostering the first child in the woman's mother's house also serves as a learning forum, during which time the child learns much about cultural heritage and behavior. It includes also much practical knowledge, house-keeping and gardening. It also serves as a link between generations, so that the oldest child in each family, getting his/her knowledge from the preceding generation, learns cultural values and transmits them to his/her own siblings. Respect for the elder generation is likewise transmitted. As generations play great roles, it is important for everybody to know his/her own place in the generational chain, where numerical age plays less role than hierarchial (compare Legesse, 1973). The respect which is shown to somebody, who even though being young, belongs to a preceding generation, is one part of ethnic etiquet which is transmitted orally. The custom of standing up when somebody superior in age enters a room, tells clearly about the hierarchy within such generations and a knowledge of age, let it be not the number of years, but the rank in age. Not being able to tell an accurate number of years of age has sometimes been interpreted as lack of knowledge, but it could rather be a result of asking wrong questions.

Dietary customs are transmitted throughout life. It is common to teach young women about certain useful/harmful food items, when they take over cooking from the elder generation, who then watch over the procedure. Advice is often followed by an explanation: "this is good for this, or this should not be used.." Gardening and knowledge about edible plants are likewise taught to young women, and each family has their own little "home-pharmacy" cultivated among the vegetables meant for cooking. How to mix the different kinds of plants is carefully taught. It is also common to add some medicinal plants to food and spices, which might be one reason why some ailments are uncommon. The elder generations know accurate doses, but there seems to be a decline in such knowledge among the younger generations.

3. Knowledge of Languages.

Olaniyan (1982) correctly points out the fact that the languages that are indigenous to each African country are very many. Such a situation is specific for Africa, which has a multilingualism, which is different from that of any other continent. It is common, though, that classifications have referred certain languages to be only dialects, whereas they in fact are specific languages. Olaniyan (op cit, p 180) has also expressed this as: "No African language is more primitive or less developed than any modern European language. What is more, any of these languages is capable of being used as the medium for scientific or technological discussion, learning or teaching. Everyone of them has the phonological and morphological resources for expansion to meet any new demands made upon it". "There is no reason for looking down upon any African language as incapable of being used in the worlds of science, commerce, industry, technology or the humanities.."

Languages are in focus both for educational planning and for development of literature. They play an important role in politics. Further, they are of utmost importance for dissemination of socio-cultural values. They are needed for the rapid development of a modernizing society, especially in education with focus upon vocational training, adult education, literacy campaigns and distant education.

Ethiopia is one example of a multi-linguistic society, well described by Bender et al (1976). Languages have been taken into account in the Ethiopian literacy campaigns, which were successfully conducted in fifteen languages (1987). Educational mass media has also transmitted many programs in different languages.

4. Elderly Women's Knowledge of Languages.

Experience from several field studies reveals a thorough knowledge of languages among elderly women in Southern Shewa (Negussie, 1988). It is common that elderly non-literate women manage several languages, that they easily shift from one language to another and that they spontaneously interpret if necessary. Most of the languages are learned in childhood, but some can also be learned after a marriage, when a woman moves to a husband from another language group. Women often talk one language with their husbands, another between those of themselves belonging to the same ethnic group and a third with people from other groups. Knowledge of language refers here to a fluent knowledge. Children are continously taught in several languages. In addition, it is common that people know the most common words of greetings and useful words of other languages.

Some knowledge of Amharic seems to be prevalent also in remote areas, and many women wish to improve such a knowledge. Turton (1984) has pointed out an important aspect of the development of e.g. Amharic among the Mursi people in Southern Ethiopia. It is important to give the formal skills, literacy and continued education, not specifically for enlightening them in accordance with modern scientific knowledge, but for giving them knowledge about their own position and role in a wider perspective of Ethiopia. Such an attitude would also be a unifying factor.

My own findings from Southern Shewa, reveal that women in very remote areas have heard radio programs, transmitted from radio stations in the capital and in regional towns and learn them rapidly by heart! The virtue of memorizing, which is one important characteristic of the oral culture, is functioning, women remember the message and discuss it with their friends, now in other languages. Such observations have made me reflect over the possibilities of combining modern literate knowledge with traditional orally-based knowledge and then finding a way of transmitting knowledge which takes into account the best from modern and traditional capacities. One could develop a model, where a message is transmitted first in Amharic and then into the fifteen languages selected for the literacy campaigns.

As the average knowledge of languages among women in my study was two or three languages, a valuable message from the literacy campaigns would be transmitted in 30-45 languages. It requires a massive support to educational mass media, but with the help of the functioning mass-organizations and increased decentralization, such a model can be implemented. The message itself can in this case serve as a unifying factor, rather than focusing upon diversities of languages and ethnic groups.

There seems, thus, to be a dynamic potential of knowledge, which once it is taken into account can enable people to learn rapidly. Rural development may here have one of its most important cornerstones for a rapid development process. Informal educative skills will enable people to spread a message to an audience two or three times as big as the first one.

It is, therefore, important that radio-receivers are available in the new reading rooms. With such a complement to written material, knowledge of any kind finds its way to the most remote areas. Health matters and agricultural methods are two examples of knowledge, which can be rapidly transmitted in such a way.

It is of special importance to utilize such skills in times of a declining economy. Modern medicine has, for example, not been able to reach many remote areas, but in spite of that, modern health knowledge could be traced in such areas. With combined and increased efforts from health services and educational mass media it is fully possible to meet a much more rapid development and modernization process than ever was expected. It can be an important factor in the striving for better health in rural areas, thus helping the fulfilment of "Health for All by the Year 2.000". The capacity of orally-based African people can then result in an explosive expansion of modernization. Computer-based information can also be rapidly transmitted through such skills.

5. A Conclusive Discussion.

It seems, thus, that orally-based cultures have a hidden potential or resource, which can be consciously utilized in modern development. Traditions are sometimes seen as polar opposites to modernity, but taking my own experience as a base, I prefer to look upon them as complementary and dynamic. Indigenous

knowledge, be it the knowledge of languages or of certain issues, is based upon its own systems and principles, which can be as well developed as any modern system. Therefore, it is necessary to havemore knowledge about the systems, the contents and the issues transmitted through oral methods. Africa and in this case Ethiopia, are, with their specific cultures, their ancient cultures and their multitude of languages, even a pattern for modern learning. Such a property must not be lost.

References:

Bender ML. et al. (1976).
Languages in Ethiopia.
London: Oxford University Press.

Braukämper U. (1973).
"The Correlation of Oral Traditions and Historical Records in Southern Ethiopia". In: Journal of Ethiopian Studies. Vol XI. No 2. Jul 1973. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

Braukämper U. (1980).
Geschischte die Hadiya Sud-Äthiopiens von der Anfängen bis zur revolution 1974. Studien zur Kulturkunde 50. Wiesbaden, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH.

Braukämper U. (1983).
Die Kambata.
Geschischte and Gesellschaft eines Sud-Äthiopischen Bauernvolkes. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Brögger J. (1986).
Belief and Experience among the Sidamo. A Case Study towards an Anthropology of Knowledge. Oslo: Norwegian University Press.

Budge Sir EAW. (1966, reprint)
A History of Ethiopia, Nubia and Abyssinia. London.

Burton RF. (1966, reprint)
First Footsteps in East Africa or an Exploration of Harar. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (ed by Waterfield).

Cerulli E. (1956).
The People of Southwest Ethiopia and its Borderland. London: International African Institute.

Elkana Y. (1985).
"The Changing Content of Knowledge". In: The International Encyclopedia of Education. Research and Studies. Vol 5. London: Pergamon Press.

Finnegan R. (1970.
Oral Literature in Africa. Nairobi, Ibadan, Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press.

Fuglesang A. (1982).
About Understanding. Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation.

Fukui K. (1987).
Rationality or Irrationality in Folk Knowledge Systems: Characteristics and Possibilities of Development in Traditional Subsistence Activities in Semi-Arid Africa. Paper for Project Identification in Developing Countries Conference. Manchester: University of Manchester.

Gusfield JR. (1967).
"Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change". In:The American Journal of Sociology. Vol 72. Jul 1966 to May 1967. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

Hable Selassie, Sergew. (1972).
Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270.
Addis Ababa: United Printers.

Knutsson KE. (1967).
Authority and Change. A Study of the Kallu Institution among the Macha Galla of Ethiopia.
Gothenburg: Elanders Boktryckeri.

Legesse A. (1973).
Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Societies.
New York: The Free Press.

Leslau W. (1965).
Ethiopians Speak: Studies in Cultural Background. I. Harari.
Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Leslau W. (1966).
Ethiopians Speak: Studies in Cultural Background. II. Chaha.
Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Leslau W. (1968).
Ethiopians Speak: Studies in Cultural Background. III. Soddo.
California: University of California Publications. Near Eastern Studies. Vol. 11.

Leslau W. (1981).
Ethiopians Speak: Studies in Cultural Background:IV. Muher.
Atiopische Forschungen. Vol 11. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Negussie B. (1988).
Cultural Wisdom and Modern Development. A Case Study of Indigenous Peri-Natal Knowledge among Elderly Women in Southern Shewa, Ethiopia. Stockholm: Institute of International Education. Preliminary title.

Negussie Z. (1976).
Hadiya-Kambata-gruppen i Södra Etiopien.
Lund: University of Lund. Department of Social Anthropology.

Messing S. (1957).
The Highland-Plateau Amhara of Ethiopia.
Pennsylvania: University Press.

Molvaer RK. (1980).
Tradition and Change in Ethiopia.
Leiden: Brill.

Olaniyan R. (1982).
African History and Culture.
Nigeria: Longman.

Pankhurst RK. (1964).
"An Historical Examination of Traditional Ethiopian medicine and Surgery". Paper for the Seventh International Congress of Anthropology-Ethnology. Moscow. In:
Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Medical Journal. Vol III. No 4. Jul.

Reminick RA. (1976).
"The Evil Eye Belief among the Amhara". In: Maloney C (1976, ed): The Evil Eye. New York: Columbia University Press.

Scheub H. (1982).
"A Review of African Oral Traditions and Literature". In: African Studies Review. Vol. 28. Nos. 2/3. Jun/Sep.
Los Angeles: UCLA, The African Studies Association.

Turton D and P Turton (1984).
"Spontaneous Resettlement after Drought: An Ethiopian Example". In: Disasters. 8.3.1984. London: International Disaster Institute.

Young A. (1970).
Medical Beliefs and Practices of Begemder Amhara.
Pennsylvania: University Press.